Park News

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Featuring the Cooperating Sites of Keweenaw National Historical Park

National Park Preserves Copper Mining History

Copper Country heritage is legendary across the nation. Oddly enough, however, the Keweenaw Peninsula and its rich history is not well-known throughout the country, or even within Michigan for that matter. In spite of this incongruity the mannerisms, culture, and foods of this remote region are familiar throughout the country.

The reasons for this familiarity run deeper than the mildly amusing linguistic nuances or the famous (infamous?) pasty, the popular meat-and-vegetable-dinner-wrapped-in-a-pastry-crust introduced by Cornish miners more than a century ago. Passing through Ellis Island, thirty-eight different ethnic groups paused only long enough to earn passage before heading for the famed mines of the Copper Country. The Keweenaw was the site of the first major influx of European immigrants to a non-metropolitan destination. As these immigrant populations ultimately spread throughout the country, so spread Copper Country heritage.

The 93rd Congress of the United States of America enacted legislation that became law on October 27, 1992, which created a national park to preserve and interpret the rich history of hardrock (underground) copper mining on the Keweenaw Peninsula. Under the direction of the American people, they found that the cultural and geological resources of the Keweenaw Peninsula's mining heritage were of national significance. Congress, however, envisioned a national park unlike any before it, a park that would operate on a partnership premise.

An underground copper miner drills to prepare for blasting. Keweenaw NHP Archives.

The Great Keweenaw Fault

The most prominent geological feature of the Keweenaw Peninsula is the high ridge that extends the full length of the 150-mile land mass. The rock base of the fault is comprised of Portage Lake Volcanics, one of the oldest exposed lava flows in any national park. The result of pressure from below the earth's crust, and lateral pressure from colliding continents 1.2 billion years ago, the ridge was formed and is now known as the Great Keweenaw Fault.

The lava flows, intermixed with conglomerate deposits consisting of gravel and sedimentation, provided the perfect structure for the formation of the largest deposit of native elemental copper known in the world today.

The legislation set down a mandate that the interpretation of those resources would be accomplished through cooperative efforts with local governmental units, private and non-profit entities of the area. As a result, Keweenaw National Historical Park has developed formal working relationships with seventeen official Cooperating Sites. The sites range from Michigan state parks to local historical societies to local governmental units to significant, privately-owned historical sites. Each of the independently operated Cooperating Sites provides interpretation of its element of the story of copper mining on the Keweenaw Peninsula. Experience the diverse heritage of the Copper Country; share the experience with your family and friends; enjoy the beauty and rich history that is Keweenaw National Historical Park.

Reading Company Housing

Alison K. Hoagland

The Keweenaw Peninsula's landscape is both natural and cultural. While we are somewhat attuned to reading the natural landscape—birds in the spring, ravages of winter, and the effects of rocky soil—we are usually less adept at reading the cultural landscape. One of the most obvious signs of the cultural landscape is its architecture. Buildings are all around us, telling us about our past.

From prominent buildings in our villages and towns we know that there was wealth here at one time; from industrial buildings we know that the copper mining industry was responsible for that prosperity; and from the multitude of modest dwellings we know that there was a large working class that carried that industry. By examining these houses, we can gain insight into the lives of the people who lived in them and their relationship to other facets of life in the Keweenaw.

Company houses—houses built by a company for its employees—are a readily identifiable subset of worker housing. By 1913 there were more than 3,000 company houses in the Copper Country, sheltering about half of the workforce. Generally, mining companies built houses in locations, dedicated areas on company property that had few services. They laid the locations out in simple grid plans, giving each house a yard of about 50 by 100 feet. To simplify the construction process, they built identical houses at one time, so that even after many alterations company houses are apparent because of their similar forms.

Company houses reveal the status of the worker within the company. Some houses were built for management employees; these had more rooms and more ornament than houses for lower-level employees. Company houses for workers were simple, small, and cheap. They were also desirable, being cheaper than housing off company property. In the houses that they built, companies declared their preference for certain workers: they wanted married men, believing them to be a more stable workforce. Because there were fewer houses than employees, companies also selected tenants in order to favor skilled workers and English-speaking ethnic groups. If a worker lost his job, he would of course lose his housing too.

Company houses are less instructive as to differences between companies. Over time, each of the larger companies built a variety of houses: saltboxes and front gables, double houses and single, log and wood frame. Only one housing form can be identified with just one company: the distinctive gambrel-roofed houses that Calumet & Hecla built around 1900. Generally, houses got bigger as time went on, with small low log buildings replaced by upright wood-frame ones. Initially, the saltbox, with its two-story front and one-story rear, developed naturally as rooms were added onto a simple rectangle. Later, circa 1900, the saltbox was built as a whole, possibly representing a revival of interest in American Colonial style. In the first few decades of the 20th century, front-gable houses became more complex, with halls and pantries and three or four bedrooms.

Despite the mix of housing forms that comprises company housing, the houses are recognizable because of their repetition. These modest houses have a lot to tell us about the workers of the Copper Country and their relationships to their companies, to their families, and to each other.

While the company houses that exist today are privately owned, feel free to explore neighborhoods and look for other evidence of the copper industry story. These explorations may lead to new questions begging for answers, not only of the Keweenaw Peninsula, but of your own neighborhood and local community.

NOTE: The Keweenaw Heritage Center at St. Anne's will present an exhibit called *Minor Houses/ Miner Houses: Copper Country Company Housing* this summer. Open every day from July 1 to September 1. Call (906) 337-4579 for more information.

These houses at Delaware Mine represent two generations of company housing. Across a muddy street, low log buildings face newer, upright frame ones. Photo courtesy of Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections.